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ABSTRACT

Before discussing the problems confronting middle schools, the author examines some characteristics of effective middle schools. Successful middle schools possess certain common elements in the areas of climate or learning atmosphere, instruction balance, teaching strategies, emphasis on achievement, guidance orientation, organization, teachers, and community relations. Challenges include meeting the uniqueness of learner characteristics and devising a program to meet these characteristics, attaining achievement levels significantly higher than previous methods of organization, expanding the cadre of committed and dedicated teachers and principals, developing an appropriate system of evaluation to assess the effectiveness of the program, and developing effective programs of communication with the community. (Author/IRT)

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MIDDLE SCHOOL CHALLENGES: ARE WE MEETING THEM?

by

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CHALLENGES: ARE WE MEETING THEM?

Introduction:

This morning I would like to share with you a few thoughts regarding the challenges middle school professionals face as we consider our role in the education of transescents. If we consider the early 1960's as a benchmark for the beginning of the middle school movement, the concept of middle school is roughly 15 years old.

I believe it is essential for teachers, principals, and parents to clearly understand why this phenomenon in American education occurred since the junior high school had been in existence for over 50 years. Why were educators and parents concerned? The answer is simply the junior high school drifted from its ideals and adopted the ideals and programs of the high school. In 1967, I suggested four reasons why I felt the middle school movement was emerging and gaining momentum. These four reasons were:

1. The re-discovery of the idea that a maturational level existed uniquely different from elementary children and high school adolescents. By patterning its programs after the high school model, junior highs of the day had rejected the idea of uniqueness.
2. Medical research had clearly indicated that biological maturity was occurring at an earlier age. This data seemed to suggest that upper elementary students were in fact beginning the transition to adolescence and that 9th graders were developmentally more allied with the high school adolescent than to the elementary child.
3. Cultural Patterns such as shifting populations from urban to suburban and from one geographic region to another were causing communities to re-design their organizational patterns. The demands

of the society in terms of integration were clearly evident. The great expansion of knowledge and the changing nature of society's mores and customs brought a realization that the closed, rigid nature of the junior high school could not cope with the "new" culture. The great changes in the social institutions such as the family, church, government were factors in looking for a school program which could cope.

4. Teachers, principals, school board members, and parents realized that institutional rigidity had set in and the schools for emerging adolescents were rigid, non-motivational, carbon copies of high schools. There were the head cheerleader, captain of the football team, head majorette, and president of the graduating class. The learning style was that of the high school and the academy before it. Outstanding curriculum and instructional programs such as the Core curriculum had been overpowered by secondary training and beliefs of the faculties involved. The departmentalized concept of scheduling rooted deeply in high schools effectively kept teachers from sharing or even seeing one another. The biggest curriculum argument in most schools was related to 8th grade U. S. History. Should 8th graders be permitted to learn U. S. History after 1865 and infringe on the 11th grade program?

Let's not forget why we are here today. Educators and parents, after living with poor curriculum, after watching children exploited for the needs of the community's ego in athletics and music, after seeing many students' educations ended early, indicated a desire for change. The fact that few teachers were excited over or committed to junior high students was of great concern.

The great rapidity which marked the conversion to middle schools is testimony to the American public's desire for improved program.

What has the middle school movement accomplished? Has the movement met the challenge of change?

Studies by Dr. Bill Alexander in 1968 and Dr. Ken Brooks in 1978 using similar techniques, seem to indicate little change from the patterns of the junior high. While certainly useful, I believe these studies largely measure change in organizational structure and are too narrow in scope to be used as a complete assessment. What these type studies can not measure is what occurs within the framework of the organizational pattern, i.e. to what degree are teachers differentiating instruction based on student need.

This can not be determined only by organization, but also by teacher attitude and practice. For example, several years ago, I was asked by a New Jersey principal to visit his middle school. Prior to my visit, the principal told me the school had a 7 period day and a traditional schedule. I wondered why I was visiting. After all, I had seen this type of school many times. To my great surprise, the program was a very substantial middle school. There was much individual attention given, solid inter-discipline elements within each discipline, much teacher sharing, and a flexible, exciting learning atmosphere.

To date, I believe the past 15 years of the movement has made a fine start in meeting the challenge of change. I feel there are a number of promising factors. These include:

1. A significant number of teachers and principals who believe in the movement, who enjoy and effectively teach emerging adolescents, and who for the first time in the history of middle level education appear committed to the level.

2. A separate middle school association not allied with either elementary or high school power groups. Under the leadership of Dr. John Lounsbury, a quality Association Journal has emerged.
3. A small but growing number of state departments, such as West Virginia, institutions of higher education such as Georgia University and public groups such as the Pittsburgh Council for Public Education have recognized and are acting on behalf of middle school education.
4. The experience which has been gained by involvement in continuous progress, open programs, and new organizational approaches provides a strong professional foundation.
5. The concept of leagues of middle schools designed to give "grass roots" support to the practitioners has grown and flourished.

I do not suggest that middle schools in this nation have arrived in large numbers at a high level of excellence, but I certainly do not accept the idea that little, if any, progress has been made. I am, in fact, encouraged by the amount of growth which has occurred to date.

Prior to presenting challenges facing the movement, I would like to explore the question of what constitutes effective middle schools. Critics have stated that a middle school identity does not exist. Certainly this is true if one is looking for the "model middle school". Rather than seek a model school, I far prefer to analyze what I consider the characteristics of effective schools.

I have observed effective urban schools, effective rural schools and effective suburban schools. While these schools differ greatly in architectural styles, teaching staffs, curriculum, learning strategies, degrees of affluence

and many other characteristics, effective schools seem to possess certain common elements which I would like to share with you this morning.

Climate or Learning Atmosphere

Effective middle schools are alive. There is a feeling of excitement, joy and enthusiasm in the classrooms. There is a feeling of togetherness among teachers and students. There is an atmosphere of industriousness and a "hum" of activity. A lack of tension and rigidity marks instruction. There appears to be a determined effort on everyone's parts to insure learning. Creative and imaginative learning activities are in evidence. Learning is punctuated with a sense of curiosity. There is a mutual respect among learners and teachers. A high level of expectation always exists.

Neil Atkins, former executive secretary of ASCD and an early principal of a pioneer middle school once said, "A middle school is an attitude". No where is this attitude more evident than in the climate of an effective middle school.

Instruction Balance

Effective middle schools are schools with instructional balance. They do not exhibit either an overemphasis on the traditional philosophy nor do they overemphasize a progressive philosophy. Rather effective schools have elements of both of these great philosophies. There exists in classrooms sequential curriculum as well as open ended instruction. There is a balance between acquisition of skills, processes, and content and programs which encourage the use of these elements in acquiring knowledge.

Effective schools and teachers, almost intuitively, select from each approach elements which insure learning. The danger in the "Back to Basics"

movement lies in its attempt to be overly scientific. While no doubt students will acquire short term acquisition of skills and processes, long term retention will be absent. Conversely schools and classrooms which stress "learning by doing" and advanced thinking skills to the exclusion of sequential learning find gaps in student acquisition of skills and processes. Effective schools have established a harmonious balance.

Teaching Strategies

Once again, effective schools have established a balance. Classrooms which stress either a group approach or an individualized approach to the exclusion of the other are less effective. Students at this age need both. The gregarious nature of the transescent demands group interaction and thinking. Yet their diverse levels of achievement and learning abilities require provisions for individual attention.

Effective teachers are teachers who rely on a variety of teaching methods. They know when to use the lecture approach and when to use group techniques. Similar to the carpenter who understands his tools, effective teachers employ a variety of approaches and have mastered the intricacies of each of them. Students possess learning characteristics which are individualistic in relation to their personal qualities and handicaps. Effective schools find ways to relate to these varied needs of students.

Emphasis on Achievement

Successful schools manage to keep a high degree of emphasis on student achievement. This statement seems somewhat trite; however, many schools get caught up in peripheral areas and sometimes lose perspective.

It is a vital time in students' educational careers. They face many difficulties related to learning and a great many distractions. Effective schools avoid this pitfall by concentrating on learning programs.

There is a tendency to de-emphasize certain learning areas because of student difficulties. For example, written compositions have become fewer and fewer. There is considerable evidence that the quality of student writing in recent years among 13 year olds has declined. Granted students experience difficulties in writing at this age but the way to improve this quality is not to avoid it, but rather to provide many opportunities for practice. Through the use of test scoring devices, the one word answer is prevalent while essay questions are not compatible. We have a difficult task in emphasizing reading with the challenge of T.V.

Effective schools have a strong personal development dimension in their program. Students' developmental characteristics provide strong competition for learning programs. The problems associated with rapid growth consume large portions of student energy. Emotional reactions lead to increased day dreaming fantasizing, and emotional states. It is difficult for students to concentrate and their attention spans are shortened. By providing personal development programs, schools supply students with knowledge of the growth processes, alleviate fears, and significantly add to the emphasis on achievement.

Guidance Orientation

Alexander, Vars, Havinghurst and others have consistently stated that every middle schooler should have one adult in the school who is a confidant and friend. I strongly believe effective middle schools are guidance schools.

While schools may differ greatly in the organization to accomplish guidance, all successful schools have developed this important emphasis.

Formal guidance including crisis intervention is apparent in effective schools, but a strong involvement by all members of the staff is a characteristic of successful schools. Quick effective communication among adults and students is the key to success.

Organization

Effective schools are organized for teacher interaction, not isolation. There is a cooperative approach. The idea of teaming has provided effective schools with a way to facilitate teacher helping teacher and in turn students. The instructional strength of individual disciplines is stressed yet the cooperation between disciplines provides students with an understanding of the various disciplines relationship with each other.

Principals of effective schools provide teachers with flexible schedules. This permits students to receive instruction in a variety of group sizes. Some form of block scheduling in which teachers through cooperative planning are able to arrange learning so that students can benefit from varying time allocations are a part of the organizational pattern of effective schools. Block time arrangements are made through scheduling expertise and do not depend on whether the school is arranged in departmental or inter departmental arrangements.

Effective schools find organizational techniques which break up a heavily graded approach. These organizational strategies permit instruction at the students' levels irregardless of grade or year in school. Some form of multi age or developmental age grouping is in evidence in effective schools and classrooms.

Teachers

Effective schools recognize and accomplish teacher commitment and dedication. Despite the advent of negotiations, effective schools are staffed by teachers who are willing to go the "extra mile" in student relations. Effective teachers exhibit certain personal characteristics. They are enthusiastic and are able to excite students in the learning process. They are creative problem solvers and almost always exhibit imagination and adaptability. Effective teachers are warm, friendly and positive in their approach; yet they are teachers who have high expectations for students and are unwilling to accept less than a student's best effort. Effective schools are staffed with teachers who have a sense of humor and who feel secure in their beliefs about student performance.

In successful middle schools, teachers are involved in the curriculum and instructional change process. This provides a solid instructional format. Through involvement, teachers develop a concern for implementation and a sense of ownership of the program. Effective schools have found ways to help teachers coordinate their instructional program with teachers in the elementary and high school levels.

Community Relations

Effective schools always exhibit a partnership relationship with parents. These schools have found successful ways to explain and interpret their program to parents. There is a willingness to meet with parents and to keep parents aware of the progress of students.

In successful schools, staff members have the courage to defend their programs against the attacks of their critics in a professional manner. While they do not appear to be arrogant, they do appear to have strong professional conviction and justification for their program.

Effective schools have developed approaches to athletics and other activities which provide suitable programs which the community views as meeting these special needs of students. These programs permit wholesome competition yet do not create unhealthy pressures on young people.

Parents desire quality middle schools. Effective schools not only have attained this quality but are able to communicate the dimensions of the program which make it a quality program.

There are a number of challenges facing us if we are to continue to grow from this fine foundation. Let us consider some of the more crucial ones.

Challenge: Will middle school educators and the public meet the uniqueness of learner characteristics and devise all aspects of program around these characteristics?

Middle school educators willingly accept learner characteristics in arriving at a rationale for the total program; however, they do not always accept learner characteristics as the base for program. Compounding this problem is the fact that developing program in relation to learner characteristics often results in approaches which are not traditional. The public often rejects such programs simply because they do not accept the fact that programs must differ because of the uniqueness of the level.

Effective programs, however, are programs which are designed in a model relationship with characteristics. For example, students are reading at diverse levels. Should program be centered only around a single level text?

There has been some progress in meeting the challenges, but most school people do not approach program out of learner characteristics.

The characteristics of the transescent learner are well known to all of us. The message of the middle school is simply to build programs around this knowledge. We often hear the term, "true middle school". To me, schools which design their programs around learner characteristics are in fact, "true middle schools". What other base can be used than the uniqueness of the student?

In my opinion, middle schools have made some progress in this regard. Every school faculty, however, no matter what period of time has elapsed since the school has become a middle school, should carefully assess program in relation to this challenge.

Challenge: Will middle schools begin to attain achievement levels significantly higher than previous organizations?

It is essential for middle schools to be strong learning schools. The back to basic movement is currently flourishing; however, learning programs for middle school and junior high students have long been criticized. Similar to all educational levels, the middle school level has swung in a pendulum-like fashion from one philosophic extreme to another with the behaviorist in vogue on occasion and the humanist in vogue on others. Attack and counter attack has been the pattern of this "ideological struggle". It is important to note that neither of these philosophies, in isolation, has produced an effective learning program for students.

The present swing to the traditional will, I believe, create rigid patterns of learning with the basic premise being that students will achieve in direct proportion to the difficulty of the program. This is as fallacious as the

progressive philosophy, in isolation, which assumes students will achieve in direct proportion with the joy of the program. Have we not observed the results of these philosophic sweeps? Do we not recognize that the answer does not lie in either extreme? Should we not, at long last, devise a learning program based upon our knowledge of students at this age in concert with our knowledge of instructional theory.

Curriculum theorists such as Alexander, Vars, Lounsbury, Toepfer, and your speaker have long advocated instructional programs built on a foundation of learner characteristics. All of these models, with slight differences, follow a similar pattern. Each has a strong basic skill and process component. Each has a well designed plan for general knowledge. Each has a personal development or self-actualizing component. Each model where implemented has created a strong learning program.

Rather than return to a pattern of education which has proven itself ineffective in the past, should we not consider a curriculum and instructional pattern which has far more chance to succeed?

Students entering middle school enter with a wide range of achievement levels, a variety of learning styles, and a variety of cognitive capabilities. They enter middle school in transition physically and emotionally. Interest spans with the onset of adolescence are shortened, emotional outbursts are common, and physical regression occurs. Myopia, fatigue, and even physical pain in joints present challenges to the teacher.

Students enter and move through middle school in transition from the childhood years in which their attitudes and beliefs are founded in adults to the adolescent years in which peer approval is so important. During this time,

emotional insecurity occurs. The culture with its changing social institutions, such as the family and church, creates more insecurity. For some, racial and ethnic identity problems begin to occur.

It seems to me that only a curriculum and learning program which recognizes these conditions and which draws upon the strengths of the two philosophies previously described has a chance to be effective. While I do not feel we have established maturity in dealing with learning programs, I do believe we have developed the expertise needed to meet the challenge.

Challenge: Will we continue to expand the cadre of committed and dedicated teachers and principals?

In the early 1960's as the middle school movement began to gain momentum, a number of us felt one of the most significant challenges facing the movement was the development of a strong teaching force. We needed groups of teachers proud of their role with transescents and excited and enthused with their teaching.

I know of no studies which have measured this development, but I do know from personal contact and observation in many states, school districts, and conferences that we are meeting this challenge. It is exciting to see the enthusiasm and joy which many middle school professionals exhibit. I also believe that teachers and principals hold the key to effective schools.

If for no other reason than teacher excellence, I am convinced that middle schools will become increasingly more effective. We need to continue our efforts in creating effective in-service programs. These programs hold the key to future growth.

Challenge: Will middle school educators develop an appropriate system of evaluation to assess the effectiveness of program?

To date, this challenge has not been met adequately. We have been emeshed in obtaining data regarding structure and organization, but there has been little information obtained regarding the results of these programs. Granted the lack of identity and the diversity of programs provide evaluators with very difficult tasks; nevertheless, it is incumbent upon all of us to begin to develop strategies which will confirm or reject the growth of middle school quality.

Researchers on occasion have raised a concern regarding the futility of measuring schools without a common program. Admittedly, I am not a researcher, but it seems to me that if we can't evaluate what is not present, there should be some way to assess what is there. The answer might lie in evaluating systems which measure effectiveness of local objectives. Local districts have a wide range of objectives ranging from the cognitive to the affective. Yet we insist on limiting our judgments to achievement in limited cognitive areas and to the character of the organizational structure.

Challenge: Will local middle schools develop effective programs of communication with their communities?

Communication with parents is quite essential at all levels of education, but it is particularly needed at the middle school level. Perhaps no other level is as misunderstood.

There appears to be a variety of reasons for this situation existing. Certainly part of the problem may be attributed to the parents' concept of middle schools as early high schools. Thus when school programs appear to be concentrating on accomplishing middle school goals, parents get concerned

that high school preparation is lacking. This is true in academic areas, but is also quite true in athletics, music and social activities. Parents often believe that high school excellence should be of primary importance, more so than meeting early adolescent needs.

The reasons for communities adopting the middle school concept often complicates the relationship with the community. Integration, or shifts in enrollment patterns may provide the need for school organizational changes but these conditions often cause resentment which if not neutralized force middle schools into serious compromising positions.

It is apparent that middle school teachers and principals must work strenuously at communicating with parents the reasons why programs are in operation. Those schools which are able to work in a partnership arrangement with their communities are able to continue to provide quality programs. It is not an easy task. It requires a creative and conscientious effort on the part of the professional staff.

I have had many opportunities to work with parent groups. Parents have concerns and questions. When an honest and sincere effort is made to communicate, I find parents most supportive.

Conclusion:

Middle school education is at a crossroads. I have attempted to point out some of the challenges which we face. I am convinced we have made significant strides toward our goal of providing quality education for the transescent. The years ahead will be both rewarding and at times frustrating but if we are willing to continue our efforts, we will succeed.